

Foucault the Neohumanist?

By RICHARD WOLIN

In 1975 and 1976, Michel Foucault published two books that single-handedly reoriented scholarship in the humanities: *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*. Thereby, Foucault fundamentally altered the way we think about power.

For centuries, power had been associated with the negative capacity to deny or forbid. In spatial terms, it stood at the apex of a vertical axis. This view suited our modern conception of political sovereignty as a top-down phenomenon. Power reputedly consisted of a relationship between sovereign and subjects. It bespoke the capacity of rulers to censure or to control the behavior of those they ruled. That was the traditional model of power that Foucault vigorously challenged in these pathbreaking studies. As he remarked laconically: "In political thought and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king." By remaining beholden to an anachronistic notion of power, the human sciences, Foucault claimed, remained impervious to the distinctive modalities and flows of power in modern society, tone-deaf to the diffuse and insidious operations of "biopower": modern society's well-nigh totalitarian capacity to institutionally regulate and subjugate individual behavior — via statistics, public-health guidelines, and conformist sexual norms — down to the most elementary, "corpuscular" level.

What would happen if we reconceived power as operating on a horizontal axis, wondered Foucault? What if the traditional vertical focus on sovereignty, governance, and law were diversionary, leading us to mistake power's genuine tenor and scope? What if power's defining trait were its productive rather than its negative or suppressive capacities? In that case, power's uniqueness would lie in its ability to shape, fashion, and mold the parameters of the self, potentially down to the infinitesimal or corpuscular level. Following Descartes, we have typically been taught to conceive of the self as a locus of autonomy or freedom. But what if this autonomy were in fact illusory, concealing potent, underlying, and sophisticated mechanisms of domination?

That is the hypothesis Foucault sets forth during his later, "genealogical" phase. Just as Nietzsche, in *Genealogy of Morals*, tried to show that the Western ideas of good and evil derive from an ethos of weakness — specifically, from the "slave revolt" in morals against aristocratic society — Foucault, in a similar vein, seeks to demonstrate the compromised origins of the modern "subject." In his view, the illusions of autonomy conceal a deeper bondage. The so-called subject is merely the efflux of what Foucault construes as a totalizing "carceral society." From early childhood, the subject is exposed or "subjected" to what Foucault labels the "means of correct training": an all-pervasive expanse of finely honed behavioral-modification techniques that suffuse the institutional structure of civil society — schools, hospitals, the military, prisons, and so forth.

In this way, Foucault boldly upends the modern narrative of progress. What we have customarily interpreted as evidence of expanding civic freedom — that is, the triumph of rights-based liberalism — when viewed in a Foucauldian optic has in fact produced more effective mechanisms of social control. Foucault audaciously stands the standard, Enlightenment view of the relationship between insight and emancipation on its head.

Knowledge, which we traditionally thought would set us free, merely enmeshes us more efficiently in the omnivorous tentacles of "biopower." The popular Foucauldian coinage "power/knowledge" suggests that the modern ideal of value-free knowing is illusory. Instead, knowledge is perennially implicated in the maintenance and reproduction of power relations. The reign of biopower is buttressed and facilitated by the scientific disciplines of criminology, medicine, public administration, and so forth. In Foucault's view, moreover, the Enlightenment-inspired discourse of the human sciences is a prime offender. The so-called sciences of man function as the handmaidens of a nefarious "disciplinary society," furnishing it with data that serve the administrative needs of "governmentality": the Orwellian technique of turning citizens into pliable and cooperative "docile bodies." Little wonder that in *The Order of Things* — a manifesto of French antihumanism — Foucault unabashedly celebrates the "death of man" and implies that, in the aftermath of his disappearance, the world will be much better off.

Contra Hegel, truth does not yield "absolute knowledge." Instead, as Foucault maintains in a 1977 interview, truth must be reconceptualized "as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements." As such, truth is "linked in a circular relation with systems of power, which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power, which it induces and which extends it." In his celebrated essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault carries this analysis a step further, claiming provocatively that "all knowledge rests upon injustice. ... [The] instinct for knowledge is malicious (something murderous, opposed to the happiness of mankind)."

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault raised the alarm concerning the perils of "normalization." The notion that one should possess a normal sexual identity, he suggested, testifies to the workings of biopower. It is a mechanism of social control that reinforces conformist sexual practices and criminalizes "deviancy." In Foucault's view, the 1960's ethos of sexual liberation, as prophesied by Wilhelm Reich and Norman O. Brown, was merely another manifestation of normalization: Under the guise of sexual emancipation, we were instructed by "experts" to define ourselves in terms of having a positive and determinate sexual identity. Yet, as normative, all such conceptions are by definition limiting, exclusionary, and fundamentally repressive. The only way to counteract the pitfalls of "normalization," Foucault suggests (following the lead of Georges Bataille), is through an ethos of radical "transgression."

Yet, at times, the maw of biopower as described by Foucault seems so inescapable and totalizing that one is at a loss as to how one might combat it. After all, how can we ensure that a given instance of transgression is not merely a ruse on the part of biopower to further ensnare us? At *The History of Sexuality*'s conclusion, all we are left with is a tantalizing yet frustratingly nebulous appeal to a "different economy of bodies and pleasures."

In North America, Foucault's innovative conception of biopower inspired new research models, above all in the areas of feminism, gender studies, and "queer theory." Auspiciously, *The History of Sexuality* appeared in English in 1978, just as the feminist and gay-rights movements had attained a measure of respectability and political prominence. That was also the moment when first-wave or rights-oriented feminism

seemed to have run out of steam. Second-wave feminism, which embraced and affirmed women's "difference," emerged to fill the void. Although liberal political thought excelled at theorizing basic rights — and thus well suited the needs of first-wave, egalitarian feminism — it had little to say about trickier questions of female "self-realization": how women might fulfill themselves as women. Here, conversely, Foucault's bio-power paradigm, with its endemic suspicions of "norms" and "normalization," not to mention its manifest sympathy for "marginal sexualities," excelled, especially where considerations of "difference" were at stake.

In American academe, that's the gist of the Foucault story. He has been venerated and canonized as the messiah of French antihumanism: a harsh critic of the Enlightenment, a dedicated foe of liberalism's covert normalizing tendencies, an intrepid prophet of the "death of man."

But increasingly that perception seems wrong, or, at best, only partially true. Considerable evidence suggests that, later in life, Foucault himself became frustrated with the antihumanist credo. He underwent what one might describe as a learning process. He came to realize that much of what French structuralism had during the 1960s rejected as humanist pap retained considerable ethical and political value.

That re-evaluation of humanism redounds to his credit as a thinker. It stems from a profound and undeniable moral insight: If one wishes to become an effective critic of totalitarianism, as Foucault certainly did, the paradigm of "man" remains an indispensable ally. After all, it is the totalitarians themselves who seek to quash or eliminate man. As antitotalitarian political analysts and actors, our responsibility is to spare him that fate.

It would not be a misnomer to suggest that in fact the later Foucault became a human-rights activist, a political posture that stands in stark contrast with his North American canonization as the progenitor of "identity politics."

The major difference between the two standpoints may be explained as follows: Whereas human rights stress our formal and inviolable prerogatives as people (equality before the law, freedom of speech, habeas corpus, and so forth), identity politics emphasize the particularity of group belonging. The problem is that the two positions often conflict: Assertions of cultural particularism often view an orientation toward rights as an abstract, formalistic hindrance. Thus identity politics risks regressing to an ideology of "groupthink." Or, as a perceptive German friend once observed with reference to the American culture wars, "Identity politics: That's what we had in Germany between 1933 and 1945." He correctly insinuated that unless multiculturalist allegiances are mediated by a fundamental respect for the rule of law and basic constitutional freedoms, the door will have been opened to fratricidal conflict.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault embraced the thesis of "soft totalitarianism" to describe the carceral system of the modern West. To his credit, he would eventually criticize with equal vigor the post-Stalinist variant of totalitarianism predominant in Eastern Europe. (Among left-leaning French intellectuals, a veritable turning point and awakening came with the publication of Solzhenitsyn's magisterial *Gulag Archipelago* in 1974.) If, during the 1960s, the heroes of the French left had been developing-world

revolutionaries such as Che, Fidel, Ho Chi Minh, and Mao, during the late 1970s dissidence was in vogue. Václav Havel, Andrei Sakharov, Lech Walesa, and a cast of less-heralded oppositionists became the new standard-bearers for the figure of the engaged intellectual.

With acumen and enthusiasm, Foucault boarded the antitotalitarian bandwagon. Since his election to the prestigious Collège de France in 1970, he increasingly cultivated the persona of an intellectual activist. During the 1970s, Foucault justly inherited Sartre's mantle as the prototype of the *intellectuel engagé*. One of his first forays in this regard consisted of a vigorous defense of the so-called New Philosophers — ex-Maoists, such as André Glucksmann, Bernard-Henri Lévy, and Guy Lardreau, who had finally seen the light and reinvented themselves as un-relenting critics of left-wing political despotism. In many respects, the New Philosophers were Foucault's intellectual progeny. Using conceptual tools he had developed such as "power/knowledge" and disciplinary surveillance, they merely extended his critical position to encompass the Soviet-dominated lands of, in Rudolf Bahro's words, "really existing socialism."

In 1977 Foucault took to the pages of the French weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* to publish a ringing justification of Glucksmann's antitotalitarian screed, *The Master Thinkers*, for daring to speak truth to power. Undoubtedly, Foucault saw through much of New Philosophy's rhetorical histrionics and shallow posturing. In his view, what was primarily at stake was a larger political point: delivering a coup de grâce to the French left's naïve infatuation with Marxism. Previously, French intellectuals had developed a network of sophisticated rationalizations to justify left-wing dictatorships. However, in view of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Prague, the unspeakable depredations of Mao's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and Pol Pot's gruesome reign of terror in Cambodia, such justifications were wearing increasingly thin. Wasn't a distinctly grisly and horrific political pattern beginning to emerge? In this way, Foucault sought to call the bluff of his fellow leftists. In his review-essay "The Great Rage of Facts," he pointedly mocked the idea, once popular among the left, that the historical necessity of socialism could ever trump basic human or moral concerns.

Far from being a one-time gambit, Foucault's spirited endorsement of the antitotalitarian ethos set the tone for many of his later intellectual and political involvements. In 1978, Bernard Kouchner, the human-rights activist and Doctors Without Borders founder, contacted Foucault to support the plight of the Vietnamese "boat people," who were fleeing persecution by the recently installed Communist government. As a result, the group "A Boat for Vietnam" was founded, with Foucault as one of its leading activists. Along with Glucksmann, Kouchner, Sartre, and Raymond Aron, the organization successfully lobbied President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing to increase France's quota for Vietnamese refugees.

The alliance with Kouchner and Glucksmann transformed Foucault into a passionate advocate of humanitarian intervention, or *le droit d'ingérence*: the moral imperative to intervene in the domestic affairs of a nation where human rights are being systematically violated. In 1981, Foucault addressed a major conference held at U.N. headquarters in Geneva where these themes were debated and discussed. In his speech, Foucault eloquently praised the responsibilities of "international citizenship," which, he claimed,

"implies a commitment to rise up against any abuse of power, whoever its author, whoever its victims." "Amnesty International, *Terre des Hommes*, and *Médecins du Monde*," he continued, "are the initiatives which have created this new right; the right of private individuals to intervene effectively in the order of international policies and strategies." If Foucault retained aspects of his earlier, antihumanist worldview, they were certainly undetectable in his moving Geneva speech.

Later that year, Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski declared martial law in Poland, brutally suppressing Solidarity, Eastern Europe's first independent trade union. The response by most Western European statesmen was a deafening silence. They judged the matter to be a purely "internal" Polish affair. They feared fanning the flames of the cold war. (Ronald Reagan's presidency had begun earlier that year.) So much for international solidarity. Better that the civilian populations of Eastern Europe passively endure the yoke of authoritarian rule. The recently elected French Socialist government had an additional, domestic political motivation to look the other way. It had come to power in an alliance with the French Communists. A rift over the "Polish question" risked fracturing the alliance.

At the behest of Pierre Bourdieu, Foucault once again sprang into action. The two intellectual luminaries jointly drafted an impassioned statement urging the Socialists not to repeat the ignominious blunders of 1936 — refusing to come to the aid of the embattled Spanish Republic — and 1956 — countenancing the Warsaw Pact's brutal invasion of Budapest. The statement was broadcast on French radio. Among its signatories were Glucksman, Kouchner, Yves Montand, and Simone Signoret. Thereafter, the French government enacted a sudden volte-face, vigorously protesting the declaration of martial law. President François Mitterrand released a statement in support of the oppressed Poles. Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy abruptly canceled a forthcoming diplomatic visit to Warsaw. Led by Foucault, French intellectuals had risen to the occasion. It was not quite the Dreyfus affair. But it was a worthy performance nevertheless.

During the late 1970s, Foucault became acquainted with Robert Badinter, an influential jurist who was an avowed admirer of the philosopher's work on prisons and punishment. In 1981, Badinter became Mitterrand's minister of justice. One of his first official acts was to abolish the death penalty. Other progressive legislative measures followed: A draconian 1970 anti-riot act was invalidated, police surveillance of homosexuals was forbidden, and the dreaded maximum-security wings of French prisons were shut down. Badinter and Foucault developed a deep friendship. Undoubtedly, many of the minister's ideas on progressive penal reform had been inspired by Foucault's teachings and doctrines.

But did Foucault's new political self-understanding as a human-rights activist have any repercussions on his philosophical views? Emphatically so. This theme is the centerpiece of Eric Paras's provocative new book, *Foucault 2.0: Beyond Power and Knowledge* (Other Press). Paras deftly and painstakingly culls his evidence from Foucault's later Collège de France lectures, most of which remain unpublished. If his insights are correct, his study portends a veritable sea change in Foucault scholarship.

As Paras shows, in his later years Foucault had clearly become disenchanted with the

research program he had honed during the mid-1970s in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*. The treatment of "power" in these works proved too suffocating and monolithic. The idea of resistance to power seemed all but ruled out.

Two developments lend crucial support for Paras's hypothesis concerning Foucault's momentous paradigm shift, which, significantly, foreshadowed a rehabilitation of "man" and "subjectivity." First, Foucault abandoned the methodological tack he had outlined in *The History of Sexuality*, which focused on sexuality as a means for "power/knowledge" to extend its sinister hegemony. Instead, during his later years, he turned to a more positive concept of subjectivity, centered on the "art of living" in ancient Greece and Rome. Foucault had come to believe that such pre-Christian, pagan approaches to the idea of self-cultivation represented a valuable heuristic — a means to overcome the deficiencies of modern conceptions of the self. Second, the term "power/knowledge" itself is entirely absent from his later lectures and texts — a telling indication of how radically dissatisfied Foucault had become with the limitations of his earlier approach.

Paras's most radical and potentially controversial claim concerns Foucault's later re-evaluation of the idea of subjectivity. During the 1960s, as a card-carrying structuralist, Foucault, along with Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and Louis Althusser, had celebrated the "death of the author" as a pendant to the fashionable postmodernist thesis concerning the "death of man." But as Paras remarks, if we know a great deal about Foucault's challenge to "the hegemony of 'man,'" we are comparatively ignorant of the process by which he abandoned his hard structuralist position and later embraced the ideas that he had labored to undermine: liberty, individualism, 'human rights,' and even the thinking subject."

The goal of *Foucault 2.0*, then, is to fill this void. In fact, given Foucault's avowed fascination with Greco-Roman techniques of self-formation in studies such as *The Care of the Self* and *The Use of Pleasure*, it would be entirely reasonable to speak of a return of the subject in his later work. As Foucault remarks in a late interview, "I think it is characteristic of our society nowadays, that subjectivity has the right to assert itself, and to say ... 'that I cannot accept,' 'that I don't want,' or 'that I desire.'"

The evidence for this return is copious. In several key later texts, Foucault demonstrates an avowed fascination with what he calls an "aesthetics of existence": an approach to the self-mastery predicated on considerations of "style" or "aesthetics." According to Foucault (here, closely following Nietzsche), the Christian idea of self-mastery culminated in self-renunciation or self-abnegation. Hence, it was disturbingly life-negating. Conversely, in the ancient world, care of the self focused on "the choice of a beautiful life." Here, the goal of self-rule or autonomy was primarily aesthetic — hence, it was profoundly life-affirming. As Foucault enthusiastically remarks in a late interview, "The idea of the bios [life] as material for an aesthetic piece of art is something that fascinates me."

In Foucault's view, the Greco-Roman idea of aesthetic self-cultivation meshes with the central ideas of two main theorists of the modern self, Baudelaire and Nietzsche. Baudelaire's "dandyism" — his idea of turning one's own persona into a veritable work of art — became for the later Foucault a positive model of individual self-realization, as did Nietzsche's celebrated injunction in *The Gay Science* "to 'give style' to one's character —

a great and rare art!" As Foucault explains: "What strikes me is the fact that in our society art has become something which is related to objects and not to individuals, or to life. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?"

Thereby, Foucault's work seems to have come full circle. Under the sign of aesthetic self-realization, Foucault rehabilitates and vindicates the rights of subjectivity. As Foucault avows, his new normative ideal is "the formation and development of a practice of Self, the objective of which is the constitution of oneself as the laborer of the beauty of one's own life."

French critics have long pointed to the central paradox of the North American Foucault reception: that a thinker who was so fastidious about hazarding positive political prescriptions, and who viewed affirmations of identity as a trap or as a form of normalization, could be lionized as the progenitor of the "identity politics" movement of the 1980s and 1990sa movement that, as Christopher Lasch demonstrated, had abandoned the ends of public commitment in favor of a "culture of narcissism." Paras's case for the "neohumanist" Foucault is persuasive and well documented. One wonders how long it will take Foucault's North American acolytes to reorient themselves in light of Paras's impressive findings. That would mean abandoning the fashionable preoccupation with "body politics" — the obsessive concern with a "different economy of bodies and pleasures" as a mode of transgression — and, following the later Foucault, according the claims of humanism their due.

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